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Six earn Chamber honors

More than 700 attend Chamber's annual Salute to Business at the Century Center

By JIM MEENAN

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SOUTH BEND — Expecting awards and an engaging speaker, those in attendance at the Chamber of Commerce of St. Joseph County's annual Salute to Business luncheon got an interesting prediction from Stan Blenke, vice president of Schafer Gear Works of South Bend and South Bend Gear.

While accepting the Economic Impact award on behalf of his company, Blenke said, he believes the U.S. will be competitive with China by 2015.

"We feel that they are raising wages in China right now," he said in a short interview after the luncheon at the Century Center "There are other drivers like currency exchange rates, communications, freight on the water costs to bring the product over here.

"We now are getting a lot more efficient, a lot more productive in this country. We see it coming back more and more."

The Chamber honored six companies and individuals, including Schafer Gear, with various awards.

Here's a look at the winners:

W. Scott Miller Distinguished Business Leader

Greg Downes, a former seventh- and eighth-grade teacher at the former St. Casimir school on the west side of South Bend, Downes has never forgotten his roots.

The former president and CEO of Gibson Insurance Group and its current chairman of the board, Downes still mentors and tutors in South Bend schools. "It was very refreshing and kept things in perspective for me," Downes said.

Downes said the philosophy to give back was picked up from his own mentor, role model and business partner David Gibson. "He really showed me ... if you want to make the community better, do something about it," Downes said.

Athena Award

Staci Lugar Brettnin took a leadership role in the Women's Entrepreneurship Initiative at Saint Mary's College, becoming a

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major force in Spark, a new college outreach program to support and cultivate entrepreneurial capacity of low-income, high-potential women who have an opportunity of launching a small business in order to obtain self-sufficiency.

Lugar Brettin, who recently received her doctoral degree in business administration from Anderson University and is a South Bend native, believes strongly in giving back to her community.

She's taught at Holy Cross College and is currently the visiting lecturer at Indiana University South Bend.

Outstanding Young Business Leader Award

Regina Emberton has enjoyed success on the business front, earning two of the most respected designations in the industry of commercial real estate — certified commercial investment member and Society of Industrial and Office Realtors.

But it's all balanced by strong community involvement, serving on the board of directors for Downtown South Bend Inc. and the Boys and Girls Club. She also was a former board member for Transpo and the United Way annual campaign.

But she's also known for taking others under her wing and volunteering in groups such as Junior Achievement.

Emberton says that type of thing is ingrained in the culture at CBRE Bradley.

"It was never a question that you could take time to go and contribute and participate in volunteering," she said.

Economic Impact

Allied Physicians of Michiana took a declining piece of property and revitalized it into a state-of-the-art medical plaza across from University Park Mall on Indiana 23.

Turning the property into the \$15 million University Commons Medical Plaza involved completely gutting the strip mall. The first medical group located in the facility in May and the last one in October. The complex is now 98 percent filled.

Allied Physicians saw the potential and a space that fit the needs of the physicians who balance time between Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center in Mishawaka and Memorial Hospital in downtown South Bend, said **Shery Purkeypile**, Allied Physicians CEO.

"It was a large amount of space, with good surface parking. The location is very visible," she said. "Easy in and easy out, there was already a traffic light there, a couple of entrances into the property.

But she also saluted her investors for being willing to take the chance.

Economic Impact

Schafer Gear Works announced in 2011 a joint venture with Somaschini S.p.A. of Italy to produce engine gears for the heavy duty truck market in North America. As part of the project, a new 50,000-square-foot plant is being built on the Schafer Gear campus on Nimitz Parkway at a cost of \$18 million. A total of 15 jobs have already been added with 10 more are projected by the end of the year.

"It's a significant award for us," Blenke told the large crowd.

Small Business of the Year

In 2006, **Barry Schleiger and Daniel Schmidtendorff** purchased the long running Communication Company of South Bend. Since taking over, the company has grown from 14 employees to 38 and gross revenues have increased from \$2.7 million to nearly \$8 million.

"We made a decision not to participate in the recession," Schmidtendorff said.

The company has been recognized on the 500/5000 list as one of the fastest growing companies in America.

The company is also heavily involved in letting its staff be involved in community projects such as mentoring South Bend students, helping out at Hope Rescue Mission, the Center for the Homeless and the American Red Cross on company time.

But its many recent awards including this one, are keyed by one main thing, Schmidtendorff said.

“We’ve implemented new processes, we’ve streamlined some existing ones to get more efficient,” he said. “One thing that we did was actively embrace technology. But without the right people, none of that is possible.”

Staff writer Jim Meenan: jmeenan@sbtinfo.com 574-235-6342

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